

from “Sentimentalism: The Radical Inheritance” [from *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*]

[Before the last quarter of the twentieth century, critics largely considered Austen’s work to be unengaged with the larger political and historical events of her time. In her influential book *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, Marilyn Butler argues that Austen’s work reflects politically conservative views. In this selection, Butler contextualizes Austen’s work in relation to the slightly earlier tradition of the sentimental novel and to the intellectual and political debates surrounding it.]

The received view of the English novel in the latter part of the eighteenth century is hardly encouraging. “Between the work of the four great novelists of the mid-eighteenth century and that of Jane Austen and Scott there are no names which posterity has consented to call great.”¹ If the general reader or undergraduate of today were required to name a novelist writing two hundred years ago, he would be hard put to it to find one he had read: Fanny Burney; Henry Mackenzie, perhaps; from a little later, Ann Radcliffe. Yet even in a decade which Miss Tompkins identifies as particularly arid, the 1770s, minor writers, intellectuals, and dilettantes were tentatively staking out new ground in a highly significant area. The middle of the eighteenth century was a period of growing insight into the subjective mind, so that when, for example, its novelists became engrossed in the triangular relationship between hero, author, and reader, they were reflecting an intellectual innovation of great importance. With few really good novels to its credit, the movement known as sentimentalism is nevertheless fascinating for the contribution it makes towards the representation of the inner life, and its active engagement of the reader’s imaginative sympathy.

Both man’s moral nature, and his mental processes, were the subject of much general intellectual inquiry, and some controversy, in the middle of the century; of bitter partisan strife in the French Revolutionary period. By the mid-1790s reaction against all that Revolution stood for encompassed most of the important features of sentimental narrative writing. Writers of the 1790s looked back on their predecessors of the earlier generation, and saw subversion in work that in its day was at most mildly reformist. Even progressives

1 J.M.S. Tompkins, *The Popular Novel in England, 1770–1800*, London, 1932, p. v.

in 1790 had their doubts about some of the disturbing implications of mid-century psychology. But by far the most numerous and influential of the attacks on sentiment came from the swelling ranks of political and religious orthodoxy. With some justice, and much exaggeration, the sentimentalists came to be read as moral relativists who threatened to undermine established religion and society. The anti-sentimental writing of Jane Austen has been taken as primarily burlesque of a *style*; but essentially it was the absorption of the earlier movement in the conscious and unconscious mind which offended, because implicitly it put the individual before the group. Sentimentalism has received a bad press in our times because the rigorous philosophical impetus behind it is misunderstood; in the 1790s it was understood only too well. At the same time it was simplified, as a form or idea will be caricatured in a second, changed generation. For the purposes of this study, which is concerned with Jane Austen and her contemporaries, the sentimentalists are significant less for what they first intended than for what they shortly afterwards conveyed. Almost every novelist of Jane Austen's day is in some degree or other in the most literal sense a reactionary. To understand the nature of the reaction, it is necessary to turn the perspective of a nervous era upon its sentimental inheritance.

Among the most controversial positions of the sentimentalist—in the eyes of the next generation—was his proposition that man's instincts were good. This tenet has often been attributed to the influence of Shaftesbury and of his Scottish disciple Francis Hutcheson; but it is probably more helpful, as R.S. Crane suggests, to look back to an earlier period and a broader, more popular influence, that of the latitudinarian divines of the Restoration.¹

Eighteenth-century optimism about the nature of man had its earlier equivalent in the sermons and writings of Tillotson, Barrow, South, Parker, Burnet, Clarke and Bentley. Most clearly in these early stages, its reading of man's nature challenged the basic conceptions of some very diverse types of Christian. The latitudinarians began in strong reaction to that harsh Puritan pessimism, according to which post-lapsarian man was too sinful to be redeemed by his own unaided efforts. But the Puritans were not the only Christians to take a gloomy view of man's depravity, as Swift's writings amply illustrate.

1 "Suggestions towards a Genealogy of *A Man of Feeling*," *ELH* i (1935), 205–30. For a discussion of the special importance of Thomas Burnet, and his possible influence via Shaftesbury on eighteenth-century theories of human nature, see Ernest Tuveson, "The Origins of the Moral Sense," *HLQ* xi (1947–8), 241–59.

Broad Church belief in man's goodness and rationality confronted the pessimism which remained a live tradition on both wings of Christian thought. As the eighteenth century advanced, discussion about man's nature became increasingly secular in tone. Confidence in the innate soundness of the natural instincts was so general that at least in Britain it largely lost its power to offend. The new philosophy of the human mind that flourished in mid-century Scotland was ostensibly without theological prior assumptions. It claimed to be a science, based on empirical evidence of how the human animal behaved. Hume and Hartley on the workings of the mind, Smith and Ferguson on the workings of society, all wrote in the dispassionate spirit with which Newton had uncovered the laws of an organic universe. Their tone implied that they were offering not controversy but fact. And yet, across the Channel in authoritarian France, the *philosophes* used these very "facts" as political dynamite.

Even in England, there was a longstanding connection between the "natural" view of man and political liberalism. In the reign of William III the latitudinarian divines supported Whig policies and sided with the liberal philosophy of Locke, while opposing the case for a strong monarchy advanced by Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes had taken the pessimistic view of human nature and drawn political conclusions from it. If man was naturally self-seeking and depraved, it followed that an enlightened despotism might be the wisest form of government. Without strong external curbs, men's passions would lead them to seek to master or destroy one another. "Hereby it is manifest, that during the time men live without a common Power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called Warre; and such a warre, as is of every man, against every man."¹ Latitudinarians such as Isaac Barrow waged a ceaseless war against Hobbes' "monstrous paradox," and urged instead, as Matthew Tindal afterwards put it, that man "is a social creature, who naturally loves his own species, and is full of pity, tenderness, and benevolence."² Throughout the next century a kindly view of man's nature tends to go hand in hand with a belief in the safety and indeed wisdom of political liberty. Among the Scots, Hume alone expresses faith in man's impulses together with skepticism about the wisdom of giving him scope to practice them.³ Ferguson and Gibbon both believe that the health of a nation depends upon the personal liberty and voluntary participation of its

1 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ch. 13.

2 From "Christianity and the Creation": quoted by Crane, op. cit., p. 226.

3 Hume's skeptical treatment in his *History* of the libertarian arguments of seventeenth-century parliamentarians aroused anger and dismay among his Whig readers. Cf. Duncan Forbes, introduction to Hume's *History of England*, Pelican Books, 1970, pp. 18 ff.; and below, pp. 34-6 [not reproduced here].

citizens.¹ Adam Smith takes entrenched power as his favorite target, and berates the self-defeating tactics throughout history of landed aristocracies and merchant guilds, together with their typical tool, an oligarchic central government. Despite Hume, the consensus links faith in the individual with impatience of constraints imposed upon him from without.

In broad terms the novel is associated from the beginning with the more individualistic, optimistic, and politically liberal strands in eighteenth-century thinking. It is true that Fielding seems unusual in openly preaching a latitudinarian theology, and that at first glance Defoe and Richardson put forward an opposing faith, the old Puritan concept of man's sinfulness and his need for grace. But more important than this difference is the fact that over a broad area the form of the novel itself pleads for the individual, for his innate well-meaningness and for his value. Ronald Paulson has observed that the ethics of the novel are more relativist than those of satire. The novelist concentrates on the man or woman, the satirist on the deed. The novelist is in effect engaged in explaining and understanding a chronological sequence of actions in terms of the man who performs them; the satirist judges the single objective fact.² The intrinsically progressive element in the novel, which distinguishes it from earlier forms, lies in the unique dominance over the action of the personality of the hero or heroine, for this in itself implies a subjective attitude to reality. But if a tendency towards relativism is present in the novel from the beginning, it becomes conscious and explicit in the 1760s and 1770s.

The broad characteristics of the sentimental movement—its conscious intellectuality, its belief in man, its dislike of dogma, and its political liberalism—are well illustrated in the work of Henry Mackenzie (1745–1831). ...

The Man of Feeling, Mackenzie's first work of fiction, arrived on the scene relatively late, in 1771. The 1760s, in politics the decade of Wilkes, in literature of Sterne and Goldsmith, had already familiarized the reading public with a radical change in narrative techniques. The most obvious characteristic of sentimental narrative writing is that it shifts the emphasis from the action—what a character does—to his response to the action. "Plot" indeed as such ceases to be continuous, or clearly defined, since events in real life are seldom seen as the direct fruits of our endeavors. The scene is what matters, and the focus of each scene is the character's state of mind in response to

1 See below, p. 35 [not reproduced here].

2 R. Paulson, *Satire and the Novel in Eighteenth-Century England*, New Haven, 1967, pp. 3–11.

external stimuli. The scene therefore becomes a vivid, isolated entity. The total movement of the book, what traditionally would have been the plot, becomes obscure, complex, perversely malign, in imitation of the real-life manner in which the environment impinges upon the individual. Even in *The Vicar of Wakefield*, for example, a novel in which far more of a traditionally novelettish kind happens than in *Tristram Shandy*, events occur in a random sequence, to reflect a destiny which is never within the characters' control. The replacement of the plot based on the protagonist's conscious actions—the plot equally of *Robinson Crusoe*, *Clarissa*, and *Tom Jones*—with an impressionistic sequence of scenes reflects the mid-century flight from rationalistic abstraction, its interest instead in mental activity as it can actually be observed. At its best the old type of plot is both consecutive, and deeply significant for the ethical life of the hero. For example, Robinson Crusoe's decision to defy his father and go wandering, Clarissa's decisions to leave home and afterwards not to marry Lovelace, are events so decisive as to order everything that follows, and to cast the entire novel into the form of a moral drama, in which the protagonist's conscience has the decisive role. But this kind of action really belongs to an older universe, sure of its moral absolutes, in which the fallen individual has to make a positive action in order to be saved. Mackenzie's generation sees human activity not in terms of black-and-white ethical choices, but neutrally, naturalistically, as a behavioral fact. The changed attitude to plot is not perverse, but the reflection of a sophisticated new perception of psychological reality. ...

The dominance of the hero in the mid-century novel is more complete [than in drama]. A little earlier, both Richardson and Fielding presented minor characters in sharp focus, giving them an objective existence independent of the hero or heroine's consciousness. In the sentimental novel minor characters tend to make an impression by way of the hero, or by virtue of their emotional link with him. The lesser characters in *The Man of Feeling*, like the mad girl, the prostitute, and Edwards, make a vivid impression upon Harley by arousing his pity. Sometimes, however, the force of feeling is on the other side. Stock minor characters of sentimentalism are those possessed by a strong, pure stream of love: the elderly servant who gives up everything to follow his master; the innocent, helpless child; the faithful dog who dies, sometimes through the cruelty of an enemy, sometimes of a broken heart. The relationship between figures like these and the hero is fleeting, partial, and often one-sided. The inevitable result is that minor figures, to some extent in Sterne and Goldsmith, to a greater extent in Mackenzie, lose their substance, their

otherness. This, at any rate, is true of those who are benign. Enemies take on a different kind of coloring: they merge into a background which in general suggests an intransigent or malign outside world. Like the lesser characters, the physical background is perceived subjectively, as if through the hero's own eyes. Perhaps it appears to change in sympathy with his moods, and is cheerful, lowering, or romantic precisely in tune with his state of mind. Alternatively it takes sides against him as the embodiment of his harsh destiny, like the gloomy and terrifying landscapes of Mrs. Radcliffe. In either case, its objective existence is suspect. The firm outlines of Defoe's social universe, Richardson's or Fielding's or Smollett's, are shaded away into a Humeian skepticism.

With the fading of secondary characters within the world of the novel, a new relationship comes for the first time to the fore. The reader's attitude to the central character becomes an active element, and even, in extreme examples, more important than relationships within the fictional world. The tendency already noted from the form's beginning, to induce the reader to identify with the hero, takes on a new dimension and consciousness in the sentimental period. Heroes and heroines are employed who readily attract identification. They are often very young and inexperienced, and hence easy victims of the corrupt or designing; or more positively, more radiantly innocent—like Harley, Uncle Toby, the Vicar of Wakefield, or Brooke's Fool of Quality. The reader's sense of involvement with these older innocents is encouraged by the characters' own ready fund of sympathy: at the faintest hint all will shed a tear for the suffering of others. They are thus model human beings, as first the latitudinarians, afterwards the empiricists sketched the proper Man. They are acutely sentient, expressive, and, above all, responsive through sympathy to the woes of their fellows.

Some recent critics have taken the view that a form which shows an undue interest in the reader, outside the world of its own creation, has entered a period of decadence. Miss Tompkins, for example, argues thus about the comedy of Beaumont and Fletcher and about the novels and plays which develop the same techniques in the sentimental period.¹ But the conscious development of the author-reader relationship, its attempt to involve the reader actively in a series of discoveries and discriminations parallel to those of the character, is surely a real technical achievement by the minor writers of the mid-eighteenth century. The responses of the reader are perceived to be potentially rich and various, and authors develop

1 *The Popular Novel in England, 1770–1800*, pp. 92–112. Cf. Brian Vickers, in his introduction to *The Man of Feeling* [(Oxford English Novels, 1967)], p. xi.

techniques to elicit them which are often exceedingly subtle. The fragmented narrative makes it possible to play with mood, moving swiftly between terror and pity, or laughter and tears. Reading these works demands the same kind of energy as living through the events they describe: it is a positive, ever-varying emotional response, of the type that Dickens and Thackeray can still evoke a century later. The reader is made aware that what is expected of him is an experiential self-surrender quite different in kind from the older pattern of reader's attitudes. Writers of both drama and novel are explicit that whereas the received notion requires judgment, the new and more proper response is sympathy. Favorite characters are warm-blooded and sympathetic; pressure, sometimes subtle and often extreme, is put upon the reader to enter into the spirit of the action, with the same impulsive generosity.

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